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ABSTRACT

To combat their school dropout problems, Columbus (Ohio) Public Schools created an alternative high school for marginal and high risk students attending conventional high schools and for students who had already dropped out. Classes at North Education Center were scheduled from 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. and featured year-round, 42-day terms to accommodate students with jobs and family responsibilities. Since the school's inception in 1983, the dropout rate has decreased from 9.6 percent to 2.1 percent. Although potential dropouts were being reached effectively, actual school leavers were not. This paper describes the "Back on the Track" campaign to identify and locate recent dropouts, provide extensive information and counseling, and motivate them to complete high school. Based on a comprehensive analysis, a target audience of 650 was chosen. Campaign components included two pieces of direct mail, telephone follow-ups, mediaspots, and T-shirts--all funded by a local shoe manufacturer, radio stations, and a promotions company. Results exceeded original goals by 42 percent. During the 1986-87 school year, 978 students were enrolled at North Education Center, compared with 681 during the 1983-84 school year. As a direct result of the campaign, 171 students called for information. Of this number, 47 enrolled for the first term, and 45 stayed enrolled. Included is the newsclipping of a testimonial from a former student whose life was turned around by this program. (MLH)

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Back on the Track

A CAMPAIGN TO RECRUIT DROPOUTS

BACK INTO THE COLUMBUS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Beverly Gifford

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SUMMARY

BACKGROUND: In the early 1980's, the Columbus Public Schools initiated a series of procedural and programmatic changes to combat the problem of school dropouts. The most important initiative was the creation of an alternative high school for marginal and at-risk students attending Columbus' conventional high schools and for students who had already dropped out. The North Education Center opened its doors in 1983 in a former high school building. Classes were scheduled from 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. so that students could go to school, hold a job, and fulfill family obligations simultaneously. With a year-round 42-day school term, students could earn credits much faster than in a regular high school and they could graduate at the end of any one of five terms during the year. Since the school's inception, the Columbus high school dropout rate has decreased from 9.6 percent to 2.1 percent.

THE PROBLEM: While the new initiatives resulted in a remarkable decline in the dropout rate, very few students were returning to school after having actually dropped out. It was clear that one target audience--the potential dropout--was being reached effectively. However, a second target audience--the actual dropout--was not.

GOAL: The goals of the "Back on the Track" campaign were: to identify and locate as many recent dropouts as possible, to provide them with extensive information and counseling, and to motivate them to complete their high school education. It was decided that the project would be deemed a success if more than five percent of the target group could be recruited back to school.

METHODS: A comprehensive identification and analysis of the district's dropouts was made to determine the age, race, sex and reasons for dropping out. Based on this analysis, a highly targeted "Back on the Track" campaign was aimed at 650 recent dropouts.

Components of the campaign included two pieces of direct mail, telephone follow-ups, paid and free media spots, print materials and the perennial T-shirt. All of this was accomplished at no cost to the school district. A local shoe manufacturer contributed $15,000 to cover most of the campaign expenses. Design and production work on the "Back on the Track" radio spot was donated. Radio stations agreed to a two-for-the-price-of-one deal on the media buy. A local promotions company provided the free T-shirts.

RESULTS:

Enrollment in North Education Center's high school program is higher this year than any year since the program began in 1983. The current term of the 1986-87 school year, 978 students are enrolled, compared with 681 students during the same term of the 1983-84 school year.

As a direct result of the "Back on the Track" campaign, 171 students called for information. Of this number, 47 enrolled at the Center for Term I. As of this date, 45 are still enrolled. This exceeds our goal by 42 percent.

Perhaps the best testimony to the success of the campaign came from a young man who spoke at a Board of Education meeting in November. He said, in part: "Before I had enrolled at North, I had been what one could definitely consider a lost cause--truly at the bottom of society's list. Drugs, crime, and total disrespect for myself and others had separated me from any desire to learn. I felt as if my future held complete failure. I am no longer having such a pitiful thought. North Education Center has provided not just a way to complete my high school education. The school has given me a completely vivid view of my future--a future that holds true success. I shall always give thanks to North."

"BACK ON THE TRACK"

A campaign to recruit dropouts back to
The Columbus Public Schools

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

The word "dropout" conjures up a variety of images--all of them negative. In today's world, the dropout is an unpleasant reality despite tremendous gains in the holding power of our public schools.

In Columbus, Ohio, a growing urban center with more than 500,000 residents in its school district, the dropout rate was hovering around three percent (about 1600 per year) during the early 1980's. While this percentage flattered our image in comparison to some, it was our view that even one dropout was one too many.

In 1983, the Columbus Public School district was awarded a Special Purpose Grant from the Ohio Department of Education to reduce school attrition levels. This project was entitled Reducing Dropouts and was instrumental in starting the North Education Center high school program in September, 1983. This program has enabled close to 400 students, who might otherwise have been dropouts, to earn diplomas.

North's no-nonsense approach to education has proven highly successful and, in fact, the school has even graduated a National Merit Scholar. A rigidly enforced attendance policy is the foundation upon which a flexible class schedule and intensive counseling is built. All prospective students are made aware that any absence will have an adverse effect on their grades and that excessive absence will lead to loss of credit for the course. (SEE EXHIBIT A, ATTENDANCE GUIDELINES.)

Classes are held year-round and students can select a schedule that meets their particular needs anytime between the hours of 8 a.m and 9:10 p.m. The offerings include all the traditional academic and elective courses found in a regular high school. Flexible scheduling permits students to hold a full or part-time job and to meet other family responsibilities while completing their high school education. The year is divided into five terms of 42 days each with classes presented in two-hour time blocks, making it possible for students to earn credits much faster than in a conventional school.

There are no extra-curricular activities. There are no study halls. The atmosphere at the school is all business. There is no socializing, no loitering in the halls or outside the building. There are no discipline problems. Attendance consistently averages over 90 percent, which is higher than many of our regular high schools. Students come and go with a single purpose: to earn a high school diploma.

Enrollment during the four years since the opening of the North Education Center has steadily increased and the district's dropout rate has shown a resultant decline. (For complete details, SEE EXHIBIT B, THIRD TERM FACTS AND EXHIBIT C, DROPOUT STATISTICS. This information is summarized below.)

NORTH EDUCATION CENTER HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM
(Third Term Enrollment Comparisons)

School Year	Total Enrollment
1983-84	681
1984-85	767
1985-86	963
1986-87	978

DROPOUT STATISTICS - COLUMBUS PUBLIC SCHOOLS
(Grades 7-12)

School Year	Dropout Rate
1981-82	6.00%
1982-83	3.28%
1983-84	2.43%
1984-85	2.52%
1985-86	2.16%

Much is known about the potential dropout, more recently described as the "at-risk" student. A pattern of nonattendance which starts in a student's early school years often leads to dropping out of school as early as legally possible. This student often has problems with the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, and because of this becomes alienated from the school at an early age. As attendance problems increase, skill levels decrease. The student, in effect, becomes a dropout long before he or she can legally leave school. In many of these cases, the student has repeated one or more grade levels. This chronic history of poor attendance is typical of most students who are referred to Juvenile Court.

Prior to the "Back on the Track" campaign, this district's primary emphasis had been placed on dropout prevention. Considerable research had been conducted and many prevention projects were initiated. As a result, Columbus now has a dropout rate of 2.16 percent--the lowest of any large city school district in Ohio.

It seems likely that larger school districts like the Columbus Public Schools will find it more difficult to lower the dropout rate below thresholds achieved through present prevention efforts. However, very little if any effort has been directed at trying to lure actual dropouts back to school. Experience has shown that the success rate in getting dropouts to re-enroll is less than five percent.

PLANNING THE PROJECT

A gift of $15,000 from the Kobacker Company, a local shoe manufacturer, was obtained through the Columbus Public Schools Fund of the Columbus Foundation. The donation was designated to be used for a project to recruit dropouts to return to school.

An action plan for the "Back on the Track" campaign was tied to a timeline developed jointly by the Communications Department and the Department of Community Education (the department which oversees the operation of the North Education Center). (SEE EXHIBIT D, TIMELINE.)

The first step in the planning process was identification of the audience. This involved extensive analysis of information from the district's Student Master File (SMF). (SEE EXHIBIT E, ANALYSIS OF STUDENT MASTER FILE DROPOUT DATA.)

The Student Master File contains approximately forty categories to describe student mobility. Of these, four describe students who leave school by choice and do not continue their education. We were able to identify and find current addresses for 650 former students between the ages of 18 and 21 in these four categories:

1. Runaway--students who have run away from home and are not attending school.

2. Work Permit--students who are at least 16 years of age and have left school with a work permit and a full-time job.

3. Overage/Quit--students who are over 18 years of age and who choose not to complete school.

4. Military--students who choose to leave school to enter military service.

Further analysis of the SMF data gave us a profile on the typical dropout. We found that 53 percent of those who left school did so because they were overage. Most of the students we were hoping to recruit fell in the 18-21 age bracket. We found that 31 percent of our dropouts were minority students and that 61 percent were male.

National studies told us that students from single parent homes are twice as likely to drop out of school as are students living with both parents. Among disadvantaged students, the dropout rate approaches 50 percent. Nationally, dropouts make up half the inmate populations in jails.

Prior publicity about the North Education Center had not effectively reached those who had already dropped out, so we designed a communications plan that we believed would be more appropriate for this audience. It called for a personal letter to each of the 650 dropouts, with follow-up phone calls to be made by the counselors at the Center.

We consulted with the local Private Industry Council (PIC) which administers funds from the Job Training Partnership Act to draw on their expertise in communicating with their clients--the majority of whom were high school dropouts. PIC's Marketing Director informed us she had had highest success with rap-style spots on youth-oriented stations in the Columbus area. She also had considerable experience in radio production and volunteered to help us produce a 60-second spot. She not only wrote the script for the spot but she also arranged for us to use a sound track featuring Stevie Wonder's drummer and a production studio hidden away in Massieville, Ohio which is used by Kennie Rogers.

A local singer was recruited for the rap portion of the spot. Finally, Columbus Board of Education Member Bill Moss, who had previously worked in broadcasting, turned out to be the perfect voice for the spot's core message. (SEE EXHIBIT F, "BACK ON THE TRACK" SCRIPT.)

All of this was accomplished for only $650--to pay for the studio time. Next, we consulted with a local advertising agency that has had an excellent track record in analyzing market segments and making appropriate media buys. After examining our dropout data, Ron Foth Retail, Inc. selected six radio stations with rock music formats as the best channels for reaching our 18-21 year old target audience.

Ron Foth bought a schedule of 99 spots and also furnished each of the stations with a public service announcement. He got the stations to agree to air one free spot for every paid spot, giving us a total of 198 spots for $5,998. (SEE EXHIBIT G, RADIO SPOT SCHEDULE.)

We then planned for a careful evaluation of the results to determine if we had achieved our goals. Early in the timeline, all staff members who customarily answer the telephones at the North Education Center received a thorough briefing on the campaign and what we were trying to accomplish. Provision was made for logging all calls from dropouts and reporting enrollment data. Specifically, we wanted to know how callers learned about the Center and what percentage of the dropouts subsequently enrolled.

Believing that the job would not be done if we simply got dropouts to come back to school, we planned for extensive counseling and assessment services so as to retain these students at the Center until they were able to graduate.

To carry out the campaign theme and the "Back on the Track" logo, we made a fast adaptation of the existing North Education Center brochure. This was to be sent to every person who called in response to the radio ads. (SEE EXHIBIT H, "BACK ON THE TRACK" BROCHURE.)

The total budget for the "Back on the Track" campaign looked like this:

Brochure	$ 250
Postage	429
Radio spots	6,648
Counseling services	5,173
Assessment services	2,500
	$15,000

CONDUCTING THE CAMPAIGN

On May 16, 1986, Superintendent James G. Hyre mailed a personal letter to 650 former students, urging them to take a look at the opportunities available at the North Education Center. An already existing brochure about the Center was enclosed. (SEE EXHIBIT I, FIRST LETTER TO DROPOUTS AND EXHIBIT J, "A DIFFERENT KIND OF SCHOOL" BROCHURE.)

During the summer months, counselors at North attempted to follow-up with personal telephone calls to the recipients. This effort proved to be time-consuming and unproductive, so a second letter was substituted for further phone calls. This was mailed on August 1 to all dropouts who had not responded to the first letter. (SEE EXHIBIT K, SECOND LETTER TO DROPOUTS.)

A week before the radio spots were scheduled to air, Superintendent Hyre sent a letter to each of the six radio station managers asking for them to give extra attention to the dropout problem during the campaign. (SEE EXHIBIT L, LETTER TO STATION MANAGERS.) Several stations ran special news features and the disc jockeys got into the act as well.

The media component was officially launched with a news conference on August 18, 1986. (SEE EXHIBIT M, NEWS RELEASE AND EXHIBIT N, NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS.) The radio spots also began on that day and ran for two weeks. (SEE EXHIBIT O, 60-SECOND RADIO SPOT.)

As a final touch, the PIC Marketing Director persuaded a local promotions company to donate "Back on the Track" T-shirts. (SEE EXHIBIT P, T-SHIRT.) The T-shirts were not used as giveaways to students who re-enrolled in school. Instead, they were worn by all the staff at the North Education Center as a way of building visibility and spirit for the project. Even Board of Education members were wearing them during the two weeks of the campaign.

EVALUATING THE RESULTS

Enrollment in the North Education Center's high school program is higher this year than it has ever been since the Center opened in 1983. During the current term, 978 students are enrolled, compared with 681 students during Term III of the first school year.

As a direct result of the "Back on the Track" campaign, 171 dropouts called the North Education Center for more information. Of this number, 47 enrolled at the Center for Term I. Thanks to the efforts of the counselors and teachers, 45 are still enrolled in Term III.

Our goal was to recruit more than five percent of the target group of 650 dropouts. If 33 students had signed up, we would have met our goal. With 47 back in school, we surpassed our goal by 42 percent.

In evaluating all of the components of the "Back on the Track" project, we believe we should have collected more information from our returning students. Next year, we plan to administer a survey and keep data on these students separate from those who have been transferred to North from our other high schools.

During counseling sessions throughout the year, however, our former dropouts have been asked what they like about North and why the program works for them. Here are some of the counselors' observations:

- While attending regular high schools, these students were often viewed as "losers." At North, students say they no longer feel they are outside the mainstream. Everyone is in the same boat.

- Many of the students have been out on their own, unemployed or working at menial jobs. They enrolled at North with a different perspective.

- The flexible schedule and shorter terms fit the special circumstances of many dropouts who must hold jobs or take care of their own children.

- Students are required to make a commitment to the North program. Regular attendance is essential and students know that if they miss more than twelve hours in any class, they will earn no credit.

CONCLUSION

There are many success stories at the North Education Center. One of the best testimonials came from a young man who appeared at a Board of Education meeting just before Thanksgiving. His remarks were reprinted in one of the community's weekly newspapers:

CALL AND POST 11/27/86

North Education Center changes student's life

By GRADY SMITH

When I was asked to stand before you, the distinguished members of the Board of Education, and all others present at this meeting, I was concerned how I could begin speaking on all the positive aspects of the North Education Center. There really is much to be said about this outstanding program.

From where and in what year North was established, I do not know. I can only say that I'm glad it's here now.

You see, before I had enrolled at North, I had been what one could definitely consider a lost cause--truly at the bottom of society's list.

Drugs, crime, and total disrespect for myself and others had separated me from any desire to learn. For a long while; there was no academic activity, enthusiasm, or advancement whatsoever. I had been to three Columbus public schools prior to North.

I found that I was so easily distracted by all the "extras" they had to offer that I knew it was going to take strict and extremely concentrated learning programs to assist me to get "back on the right track."

I needed an environment composed strictly of learning. North has supplied exactly that, and I must say that it has truly been effective.

North Education Center presents students with a spirit of completion--getting that diploma and getting out. The flexible schedule gives drop-out students and others an opportunity to do just that.

I, for one, must say that since my enrollment at North, I have been doing quite well. My grade point average and my desire to learn has increase tremendously. I am no longer ashamed of my past. I know it can be as true for someone else as it was for me, and discouraged people need to know that getting back on track is not impossible. I feel it is necessary for me to provide one such example.

There was a time when I felt as if my future held complete failure. I am no longer having such a pitiful thought. North Education Center has provided not just a way to complete my high school education. The school has given me a completely vivid view of my future--a future that holds true success.

I shall always give thanks to North.

For more information about the programs available at the Columbus Public Schools' North Education Center, call 268-8606.